

LISTENING TO MUSIC HISTORY

An introduction

Have you ever heard how Charles-Marie Widor plays his own works on the organ in Saint-Sulpice in Paris? Have you ever heard the improvisations by Louis Vierne in Notre-Dame de Paris? Have you ever heard how close friends and colleagues of Gabriel Rheinberger play his organ sonatas, or have you ever marveled at the organ wizardry by history's most famous organist Edwin



by **Lars Rosenlund Nørremark**

MA of intellectual history, concert organist, organ teacher at the Danish National Academy of Music and Løgumkloster school of church music, lecturer and peer-review'ed writer



Henry Lemare like hundreds of thousands of people? Hopefully you have, but most likely you have not...yet! The fascinating world of historical organ recording has sadly been neglected for far too many years in academia, in the music education systems, and the music life in general, even though the content of these recordings can bring us in direct contact with many canonic composers and organists such as Charles-Marie Widor, Louis Vierne, Joseph Bonnet, Max Reger, Eugène Gigout, Marcel Dupré and Charles Tournemire, just to name a few but significant personalities - but the list goes on.

We thus have an international organ community that either does not know the existence of these recordings or when they do listen to the recordings, the performances and the performers they hear sound so odd and mysterious to them, that the content is dismissed in dismay or discomfort.

This might seem like a blatantly exaggeration, but nonetheless it is what usually happens, when musicians are confronted with the actual performances of the old masters.

But why is that? Why do we as a community so easily dismiss the validity of these incredible recordings?

Well, the answer is quite simple; we have a rather fixed picture of the organists and composers of our organ history through either organ studies at various music academies, biographies, concert pamphlets and paraphernalia, but when we start to listen them actually playing, they do not play or behave "as they should". On the contrary they tend to do things rather differently, from what is expected of them. Here is a list of the most basic things, they do "wrong":



- They make and accept mistakes - often quite a lot. An example of this is a recording with George Dorrington Cunningham (1878-1949) playing the organ sonata by Julius Reubke, where it seems that he does not care much for the plentiful of minor mishaps here and there.
- They can not keep a steady tempo in parts of the repertoire where they should. An example of this is a recording with Carl Hofner (1842-1912) playing Johann Sebastian Bach's Prelude and Fugue in C minor, BWV 549, where he accelerates and decelerates all the way through the fugue.

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- They alter the written score, sometimes rather significantly. That becomes even more disturbing, when they are the composer of the piece. An example of this is the recordings with Max Reger playing his own works.
- They play *inégalité* in parts of the organ literature, where the modern performance practice tells us, we definitely should not play *inégalité*.

- Besides the *inégalité*, they consequently alter rhythmical figurations. An example of *inégalité* and rhythmical alterations is a recording with Arno Landmann (1887-1966) playing Sigfrid Karg-Elerts Harmonies du Soir, op. 72, 1.
- They have all sorts of bad habits, which are deemed not *comme il faut*: Extensive use of arpeggio, asynchronicity between hands internally and/or feet, the use of "wrong" registrations (e.g. playing the French Cavaillé-Coll music with no regards to our modern understanding and concept of proper registration practice or they use a "glockenspiel" as a mixture, just to name a few) or they accept poorly tuned instruments. An example of arpeggio and unconventional registration is a recording with Herbert Walton (1869-1929) playing Sigfrid Karg-Elerts Clair de Lune, op. 72, 2, and an example of asynchronicity can be found in the above mentioned recording with Arno Landmann playing Sigfrid Karg-Elert.

The prime example of poorly tuned organs are the recordings with Olivier Messiaen playing his own works in Sainte-Trinité in Paris from 1956.

- They play not only the canonic classical works, but also delve into the much more "not so accepted" repertoire, that is, the undercurrent of salon-ish music and the pop music of the heyday. A good example is to do a brief overview of the programmes with Edwin Henry Lemare, where he easily could begin with the Academic Festival Overture, op. 80 by Johannes Brahms in his own transcription, then play Johann Sebastian Bach's Prelude and Fugue in D major, BWV 532, and end with his own arrangement of the then popular song When you and I were young, Maggie.

But why is that? Why would luminaries such as Olivier Messiaen, Edwin Henry Lemare, George Dorrington Cunningham or Arno Landmann do this?

The answer to this set of questions is on one hand deeply profound and complex and on the other hand rather straightforward - and the two answers are of course inseparably intertwined. Let's begin with the straightforward answer:

It is not the old masters who do anything wrong; it is rather the modern listeners, you and I, who have it all wrong.

The more complex answer begins with the way we understand and utilize history. As mentioned above, we have a very stable understanding of our organ music from a historical and performance point of view.

The basis for our scientific methodology and performance aesthetic is the notion that we can find the answers primarily by studying written sources. We first of all study scores and manuscripts, and methodically construct an Urtext version of a given organ piece, after which we have an actual score for the basis of our performance. As a context for our music performance and a source for studies in historically informed performance practice we also study written contemporary (or near contemporary) first or second hand accounts, musical treatises and other written source material.

We thus have established a tradition, a paradigm, and a way of understanding music history through written source materials. This understanding and methodological approach encompass a variety of complete performance practice systems, and through this systematic approach we have created a matrix for understanding the scores down to the

individual notes - e.g. there are countless books and articles written about the performance style and history of organ music by Johann Sebastian Bach. In this paradigm everything is functioning as it should; we have a clear understanding of *bon goût* and therefore how to play almost every piece in the established repertoire.

On the contrary the discourse with the historical recordings quite easily ends in an unfounded critique of the historical recordings, where we try to discredit the content of these recordings; e.g. we argue that historical recordings are scarce and the early poor recording conditions surrounding the recording process and the inferior technical sound quality make them almost useless for further scientific analysis.

There are of course many different aspects of these recordings, where one has to be cautious as with every type of historical source. Historical recordings have to be subjected to a comprehensive critical scrutiny, but it does not change the fact that historical recordings should be treated as historical sources equal to written historical sources, because by applying the principle of Occam's Razor, it must be so that the historical recordings are, by far, the most accurate access to our music history.

The paradox, though, is that it is clear from the first bar, that the old masters do not perform according to our modern performance and academic paradigm. So we have established a modern paradigm concerning actual historical people in which we have a particular way of how

they acted and thought about themselves and their music and ultimately played their music, but confronted with the performances of the actual musicians, they do not fit into our modern paradigm.

The argument here is not that this normative methodology is poor research or invalid, but simply that we need to be able to include historical recordings equally to the written sources to paint a much more nuanced picture of our music history. In my experience it is very possible and even fruitful to incorporate the historical recordings alongside the traditional written sources.

Another reason for the lack of interest in recordings is also due to the fact that the records themselves in the words by Theodor W. Adorno have been fetishised as collector items and thereby has been looked upon by professional musicians as suspicious second rate sources. Therefore for many years we have had a situation where a vast bulk of some of the most mind bending historical recordings sit on shelves belonging to record collectors who are more interested in the physical nature of hoarding as many records as possible and less interested in listening to them.

But fortunately the tides have turned in the last two decades through prolific record companies like Naxos Historical, Arbiter Records, Appian Publications and Recordings and Marston Recordings - just to name a few - who relentlessly have republished innumerable historical recordings. They have - dramatically put - given classical history its own history back.

Given these positive circumstances, I would like to propose that we start to listen to our own music history. This of course requires us to stay very open minded, and counteract our initial reaction to dismiss what we hear.

The historical recordings do not contain the complete history, because no historical source written or sonic can boast this legitimacy, but the starting point is, that we accept that the historical recordings have a profound contribution to our understanding of our music history and we must start to work with these sources on equal footing to the written sources. By doing so we hopefully can indeed get a much broader and nuanced understanding of our music history.

I am, as previously mentioned, aware that every type of medium, every recording itself, every organist and every organ needs a proper critical con-textualization. It is, though, beyond the scope of this article to do this thoroughly, but here are some critical perspectives to be taken into consideration when listening to these recordings

Gramophone recordings with organ music first became a serious reality after 1925 when the recording process began utilizing the microphone, and even after this, organists were at times instructed not to use either the loudest reeds or abrupt crescendi because the sudden dynamic change could make the recording needle jump from the groove, and thereby ruining the ongoing recording. Thus we have to keep in mind that the registrations on these early organ recordings, especially

from the 1920s and 1930s, can express a compromise between a musical aesthetic choice and a recording technical limitation.

However, the most fundamental perspective that has to be kept in mind is that the early records, the 78-records, were limited to containing only 4:30 minutes on each record side. This meant that if the duration of a given piece of music exceeded this, it had to be cut into 4:30 minute-slices, or sometimes more radically, sections had to be removed from the performance in order to accommodate it on a record side. There are even anecdotal accounts mentioning that musicians at times sped up a piece to make it fit.

From a modern perspective this might seem very problematic, but as mentioned, we have to keep in mind that the old musicians' view of the written score was radically different, and it was common practice to change a piece of music according to a given concert situation, e.g. Hans von Bülow instructed his students, that if it was the first time a musician played a piece of music for an audience, then all repetitions should be observed, and one had to be overly paedagogic in the shaping and phrasing of melodies and sections, so people could get accustomed to the new piece. Then the next time one could omit repetitions and play much more freely and extemporize.

Furthermore, until around the 1950s it was not possible to splice different smaller takes together, so every record side had to be recorded in its entirety. This can explain the presence of a larger amount of

technical inaccuracies than on modern recordings, but it is certainly not the complete explanation, because it is very clear from an overall perspective, that musicians and audiences accepted a far larger amount of technical mishaps than we do today.

So these alterations and inaccuracies when dealing with the technical limitations on a recording was not alien to them, it was simply their natural approach to performing music.

The organ rolls can hold up to around 15 minutes of music, so they do not have the same time limitations as with the 78-records. They also contained changes in registrations and swell use, and wrong notes could even be removed in the subsequent editing and manufacturing process.

But where the audio recordings are more or less fixed to a specific tempo - that is around 78 rpms - the tempo on the organ rolls depend on the tempo the rolls are played back in, so even though there is a printed tempo on each organ roll, the tempo is ultimately up to the discretion of the person operating the organ roll player and the technical state of the playback mechanism.

Research into this field has revealed that the question of establishing a proper playback tempo is rather problematic, but again we have to suspend our modern perception of a fixed interpretation of a tempo in a given piece of music; there simply wasn't only one tempo for these musicians in a binary sense.





Photo

A recording session for the Welte-Philharmonic Organ with Enrico Bossi, 1911

The Welte Philharmonic Organ is an extremely sophisticated system, a sort of analog computer, but due to a technical detail the pedal was delayed in relation to the hands, which gives the impression of a markedly repetitive asynchronicity. In this connection we have to keep in mind that asynchronicity was one of the most fundamental performance aesthetic characteristics, so once again, the mechanism only enhanced what the musicians did in the first place.

This inaccuracy has been countered in the CD-series The Britannic Organ Vol 1-12 on Oehms Classics, because the basis for these re-recordings consists of corrected MIDI-files derived from digital scans of the original rolls. What one therefore can hear on these Britannic-recordings are the most accurate realizations of the organ rolls, where immaculate care has been taken to ensure both the correct registrations and the proper playback speed.

If we keep these limitations inherent from the recording technologies themselves in mind, I can undeniably say that the vast majority of the oddities you are about to encounter on these old organ recordings are not caused by a unreliable playback instrument or recording technique, a faulty technical ability from the organist or poor musical judgment. It is simply because the performer wants it this way.

I'll be closing this small technical discourse, by emphasizing again that no singular historical source or type of source can cover a historical phenomenon exhaustively, but by combining as many

sources and, more importantly, many different types of sources as possible, and keeping the various limitations and error sources in each type of source in check with a critical interpretation, we can reach a more nuanced and informed historical interpretation.

I deliberately use the terms "nuanced" and "informed" and not "correct" or "authentic" historical interpretation, because the scientific falsification principle by Karl Popper informs us that we can't reach an all-encompassing truth, but only ask informed questions and making the best interpretations through the available source material, and thereby putting our ideas and theories to the test.

The list of recommended historical recordings is long, very long, but a place to start could be the following list below.

- Charles-Marie Widor playing his own works, Saint-Sulpice, Paris, recorded 1932
- Louis Vierne playing Johann Sebastian Bach, his own works and improvises, Notre-Dame de Paris, recorded 1928
- Charles Tournemire playing César Franck, his own works and improvises, Sainte-Clotilde, Paris, recorded 1930-31
- Max Reger playing his own works, Welte-Mignon organ roll, recorded 1913
- Johannes Diebold (1842-1929) playing Gabriel Rheinberger, Welte-Mignon organ roll, recorded 1913

- Arno Landmann playing Harmonies du Soir by Sigfrid Karg-Elert, Welte-Mignon organ roll, recorded ca. 1920 (Sigfrid Karg-Elert dedicated the Impression in D-flat major, op. 86, 9 to Arno Landmann)
- Alfred Sittard playing the conclusion of Ad nos by Franz Liszt, St. Michaelis Kirche, Hamburg, recorded 1928

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This is just the tip of the iceberg and there are literally thousands of recordings just waiting to be discovered. I can most heartily recommend my own website The International Historical Organ Recording Collection, www.ihorc.com, which houses the perhaps most comprehensive collection of historical organ recordings in the world and the before mentioned organ roll recordings realized on the Welte

Philharmonie Organ in the Museum for Musical Automats in Seewen, Switzerland, published in the series The Britannic Organ Vol 1-12 on Oehms Classics.

The most important advice for you is to read along in a more or less accepted modern edition of the score when listening to the recording. Only then, by reading along in the score, one can really get a grasp of the amount of liberties taken, and how the old masters thought about the music and performance in general. There is so much to be learned from the grooves of the old records or from the punctured holes in the organ rolls. All of the above mentioned recordings can be found either on www.ihorc.com or on The Britannic Organ-series.

I wish you all the best on a great journey into the world of these marvelous historical organ recordings.

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The author Lars Rosenlund Nørremark studied organ and church music at the Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus, Denmark, completing his studies with a soloist debut in 2008. He also studied at the University of Aarhus completing with a master's degree (MA) in Intellectual History/History of Ideas and Philosophy in 2019.

He has been collecting and studying historical recordings for many years and is the founder and editor of The International Historical Organ Recording Collection, www.ihorc.com, which in an international context collects and publishes historical organ recordings.

In 2021 he was the editor of a publication with Danish historical organ recordings on the label Helikon Records in connection with the 50th anniversary of the Danish Organ Society.

He has taught and lectured at music conservatories and Danish schools of church since 2008 and is currently associated with the Danish National Academy of Music in Esbjerg.

He is a peer reviewed published author, has recorded several CDs which have received international acclaim, and holds lectures and masterclasses on the subject of historical recordings.

lars@norremark.dk
www.larsnorremark.dk